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JEFFERSON HOLDRIDGE, *Stepping Through Origins: Nature, Home, and Landscape in Irish Literature*.
Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2022.
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As the planet warms, the field of ecocriticism continues to unfold rapidly in Ireland. This unfolding coincides with both the climate crisis and the shifting of the Irish landscape toward an onslaught of highways and buildings in a twenty-first century that is beginning to bear little resemblance to the landscape of past centuries. Of the many recent publications addressing these issues, Jefferson Holdridge's *Stepping Through Origins* offers a breadth of profound observations and analysis over the course of Ireland's literary history. These observations examine both familiar and unfamiliar works of Irish literature through the evolving interrelationships of nature, landscape, and the ideal of home.

The chapters of *Stepping Through Origins* move chronologically through both Irish history and literature, beginning with a chapter on myth, nature, home, and landscape. Holdridge emphasizes the merging of myth and landscape and the blurring of boundaries between human and animal, culture and nature, with a particular focus on early Irish literature and the Ulster Cycle. Holdridge discusses the political ramifications of Irish nature writing in "Tumbling Down into the Sky," with a fresh perspective on Swift's Part Four of *Gulliver's Travels*, where depictions of Irish connections to nature prove inadequate and where Swift resorts instead to satire and "mock pastoral," highlighting conflicts between landscape, family, and government. The chapter also covers Edmund Burke, as Holdridge delineates nicely between both Burke's observations of the beautiful and the sublime landscapes in both Burke and Goldsmith (*The Deserted Village*), and how, for Goldsmith especially, avarice and luxury rob the Irish landscape of its beauty, and thus the ideal of home.

Holdridge's third chapter examines the Famine through Lady Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) and William Carleton's *The Black Prophet* (1847), noting the growing awareness of political and social strife brought on by a disconnection to the land through the arrival of famine. Holdridge emphasizes in this chapter, titled "Great Hunger, Unspeakable Home," that "[t]he real or mere Irish could not objectify or appreciate nature as could the Anglo-Irish" (57), a separation influenced by the Ordnance Survey of the 1830s. Likewise, Carleton's *The Black Prophet* centers on a family that represents Ireland, famine, and hunger, and a better way of life where home and landscape can co-exist.

An entire chapter of *Stepping Through Origins* is devoted to *Laurence Bloomfield in Ireland* (1864), the epic poem by William Allingham. This section also explores the historical gap between the Famine and the 1916 Easter Rising, discussing how Ireland is still trapped by the prejudice of imperial Britain. Holdridge focuses on the trope of the absentee landlord here (a common theme in Anglo-Irish literature) as well as—in the case of Allingham's long poem—an Irish landscape perceived through the returning absentee landlord and the inexorable links, at this point in Irish history, between culture, nature, and rebellion. The chapter culminates with a terrific connection to Yeats's poems of social disruption in the early twentieth century.

In Chapter Five, Holdridge delineates ideas of the inhuman and nonhuman in the nature poetry of Yeats. He notes that Yeats supplies animals with supernatural as well as natural forces, where

“‘inhuman’ has been reserved for the divine, and ‘nonhuman’ has been used to designate the animal kingdom” (85). Holdridge makes an interesting point: Yeats sees myth and religion as essential gateways to the inhuman/transcendent/supernatural, with the natural/human self being counterbalanced by history and science. For Yeats, Holdridge posits, the inhuman is essentially God and the nonhuman is animal; thus, the human forms a trinity balancing inhuman and nonhuman. Ultimately, for Yeats, the deepest connection that humans can make to both the divine/inhuman and the animal/nonhuman is through instinct. The significant relationship between religion and the inhuman is especially pronounced in the major creative period of Yeats’s poetry. As Holdridge illuminates, Religion informs his composition of *A Vision* and is critical to his formation of gyres or historical cycles.

One of the more interesting chapters in *Stepping Through Origins*—and an area of Irish literature that has not been given enough attention—examines the poetry of James Joyce. In Chapter Six, “Bleeding from the Torn Bough,” Holdridge argues that landscape in Joyce’s verse becomes the author’s chief concern, noting that Joyce “gives us an urban pastoral not only to show how the pastoral myth excludes the city dweller, but also to illustrate how the land has often been a sign of exclusion for the Irish” (106). For example, Holdridge’s analysis of Joyce’s poem “Watching the Needleboats at San Sabba” is particularly compelling. Incorporating Joyce’s own words, the chapter closes by noting that his poetry is a protest against himself as he faces “his own uncanny ghosts through landscape, love, and evasion” (119).

Another often-overlooked work of Irish literature is *The Last September*, the 1929 novel by the Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen. Set against the backdrop of a country mansion, Bowen’s novel ponders early-twentieth-century life during the Irish War of Independence. In chapter seven, titled “Like Splintered Darkness,” Holdridge elucidates the role of the observer and the subjective reading of landscape, through the power of description, in Bowen’s novel. He also contemplates how “landscape and nature can be read as illustrations of the characters’ beliefs, values, and political as well as personal predicaments” (121). The novel, for Holdridge, focuses on the wild force of nature and its impact on both the political and personal lives of its characters, where “the personification of nature and the intentionally jagged grammar are indicative of their unstable political and psychological condition” (130).

Chapter Eight of *Stepping Through Origins* offers an analysis of the short fiction of Seán Ó Faoláin, including “Fugue,” “Midsummer Night Madness,” “A Broken World,” and “Admiring the Scenery.” According to Holdridge, Ó Faoláin emphasizes that the tension between nature and landscape produces a sense of loneliness and solitude within the Irish communities depicted in these stories, which indicate the “need for the aesthetic perspective that landscape and wilderness (nature) provide” (139). Holdridge moves fluidly through his analysis of these four stories and notes often, as he does throughout the book, that the Irish landscape is a “palimpsest of conquest.” He also meditates on how much human perspective defines landscape in these stories, ultimately concluding that Ó Faoláin “finds succor in the Irish landscape and escape from the bitterness of history” (153).

Chapters Nine and Ten of *Stepping Through Origins* focus on the authors Louis MacNeice and Patrick Kavanagh. Chapter Nine, subtitled “Family Feeling in Louis MacNeice,” projects family romance onto an Irish landscape where “the poet’s father and mother seem to fuse with natural forces of the landscape” (155). Found in much of MacNeice’s poetry of the Irish west, these projections align with an Anglo-Saxon desire to separate cultural and political allegiances by comparing northern (populated) and western (sparse) landscapes of Ireland, two disparate forces that reflect and embody the land around the poet. In Chapter Ten, subtitled “Oedipal Burdens and Christian/Pagan Ecstasy in Patrick Kavanagh,” Holdridge relates Kavanagh to MacNeice as Kavanagh moves between pastoral and anti-pastoral modes in his evocation of landscape and home. This connection includes astute observations of Kavanagh’s epic poem “The Great Hunger.” For example, Holdridge remarks that

the poem “sets out to explore and comment on a relation between man and nature that strikes neither the elegiac note of the British pastoral nor the social protest of the Irish one” (171). Rather, it “marks out a painful and achieved connection between private suffering and the complex references of local faith, sexual anguish as a great hunger equal in many ways to famine” (171).

The strongest and most compelling chapter in *Stepping Through Origins* is Chapter Eleven, “Beneath Tilt and Loam: Seamus Heaney’s Journey to the Underworld.” Here, Holdridge argues that “any study of landscape in Ireland is inseparable from history” (180), emphasizing that the modern/postmodern landscape becomes a psychological one fused with the land as an emblem of conquest. Citing many poets in this chapter—including Kavanagh, Derek Mahon, and the naturalist poet Sean Lysaght—Holdridge proposes that Heaney’s landscape is built upon the foundations of fossils, history, and memory and that Irish poetry, by and large, is preoccupied with discovering a “representative ‘home’ landscape, even as deep experiences of nature consistently elude representation” (189). Just as MacNeice’s poetry melds family and landscape, so too does Heaney’s evocation of Ireland, where the domestic space becomes a central theme in Heaney’s work. This theme includes the death of the poet’s mother and, by degrees, the bonding relationship between Heaney’s father and the land. Holdridge notes, “Heaney understands that redemption is possible in his alignment with his father” (202). The examination of Heaney’s poetry in this chapter encapsulates the relationship between ideas of nature, home, and landscape in Irish literature and offers an excellent example that recalls the illuminating subtitle of this book.

The final chapter, “In Defiance of Human Frontiers,” examines the works of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Paula Meehan. These poets “tend to emphasize the mythological qualities of nature, while insisting that there is something in nature that escapes all mythologizing” (204). In his analysis of these two poets, Holdridge brilliantly draws out ecological, aesthetic, religious, scientific, political, and personal perspectives, a terrific culminating chapter to the book. The concluding chapter proffers—as E. O. Wilson does in his landmark book *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*—a vital message for a twenty-first-century Ireland. To better understand the vital connection between man and nature, between the Irish and Ireland, we must merge science and the humanities. Holdridge observes that both Ní Chuilleanáin and Meehan mark a shift in Irish poetry, where politics become subordinate to nature and forge a stronger connection between nature and culture. With climate change promising altered landscapes across the globe, the change in sea levels is vital. The stakes are now a question of survival, not only in Ireland, but everywhere else.

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